

Presentation at Annual Meeting of the Northern New England Chapter of the American Planning Association

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Eleven years ago, Maine adopted the Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act, which mandated that all communities in the State prepare and adopt a comprehensive plan and land use ordinance consistent with 10 State goals.

The first, and some say overarching, goal is:

"To encourage orderly growth and development in appropriate areas of each community while protecting the State's rural character, making efficient use of public services and preventing development sprawl."

Yet over the past four years, the Maine State Planning Office has documented that Maine's population is spreading out; and not just in southern Maine or around its largest cities, but even in the most remote parts of the State.

This research, which is described on our display and in our publication, [The Cost of Sprawl](#), has clearly documented that this outward movement of our population has had unanticipated and unintended consequences.

It costs the State budget perhaps \$50 - \$75 million per year in what ought to be controllable expenses (for schools, school buses, and roads, among other things) and local budgets millions more to pay for new and redundant infrastructure and lengthened services routes for police, fire, emergency, road maintenance, and plowing in remote areas.

It hurts the environment. It is the leading cause of Maine's ozone days, threatens more than 2,000 lakes, and destroys habitat for wildlife.

It eats away open space and productive rural lands.

It forces restrictions on traditional rural uses, including farmers, loggers, and gravel miners, many of whom were working the land before the suburban development arrived.

Sprawl also saps traditional regional centers. They face the multiple threat of a fleeing middle class population, high tax rates, under-used infrastructure they must maintain, and the isolation of dependent populations, like the elderly and disabled.

In a word, sprawl is wasteful.

But it is also powerful.

It gives ordinary people the chance to live in privacy and close to nature with plenty of elbow room.

It gives rural land owners a chance to sell to developers and cash-in on their hard-earned equity.

It allows us to escape noise and landlords.

It is part of the American dream.

Over the last 30 years, the fastest growing towns in Maine have been the "new suburbs," 10 to 25 miles distant from metropolitan areas.

These high growth communities have accounted for virtually all of the State's population growth – with no sign of abating.

(MAP) Let's look at how Maine's traditional pattern of New England town and countryside has changed from 1940 to present.

(1940) In 1940, Maine's urban and suburban population was centralized in a limited number of discrete centers indicated in red surrounded by rural areas shown in green.

(1960) As we move to 1960, larger blocks of emerging suburbs, the yellow areas, begin to appear.

(1970, 1980, 1990) The trend continues in 1970 and 1980, until by 1990 sizable blocks of suburban and urban development are apparent – nearly continuous along the southern coastline and distinct along the State's major highway corridors.

Over these 20 years, there was as much land development as had been developed in the entire history of the State, consuming land four times faster than population growth.

(2000, 2010) If we assume a constant rate of development based on actual occurrence between 1990 and 1996, by 2010 land consumption by development will double again.

(2020, 2050) By 2020, sprawl will blanket most of the southern part of the State and by 2050, it will consume Bangor and Penobscot Bay.

(1940-2050) Now, let's see that again.

As an aside, we have found that as density increases from about 1 unit per gross 10 acres to 1 unit per gross 5 acres, the scale is tipped against a "rural" economy.

Some rural uses still exist, and account for peoples' belief that they are living in a "rural" area, but these uses are really ancillary to a "suburban," not really a "rural" economy.

Understanding that sprawl is indeed happening in Maine, nearly two years ago, Governor Angus King called for a statewide community dialog to first familiarize people with what our chosen pattern of development is costing us, then to ask whether the sprawl that is occurring is of concern, and, if so, whether the State should be involved in trying to address it.

The answer was a resounding yes – but not through regulatory means.

While the State has looked to its Growth Management Program to control sprawl, we have come to realize that many forces push or pull growth in a given direction.

Among them are State and Federal investment policies and regulatory practices whose intention to achieve one objective often results in other, unintended outcomes.

The new challenge Maine is embracing is to review the public policy and investment practices of government to ensure that they do not contribute to sprawl or thwart the efforts of local planning.

The paradigm has shifted away from simply drawing a boundary between growth and rural areas where development is directed into growth areas.

It is moving toward integrated policies and investments – in which there are no winners and losers, but where the vital role of both the rural landscape and the village or town center are recognized and supported.

The State Planning Office recognizes that the approach has to be both generous and demanding of efficiency; must at once respect the right to choose and insist upon responsibility for the cost on one's choices; must simultaneously honor property rights and the public interest.

There are three major principles to Maine's approach to "smart growth."

(Figure 70) First – the freedom to choose to live where one wishes.

With the twin principle that we should be willing, individually, to bear the costs of our individual decisions.

We should not be asking society to pay these costs.

So a key component of the approach is to turn to the market place where costs can be properly allocated and individual decisions can be made with more complete knowledge of those costs.

A second principle is that healthy organisms don't die.

If our villages, town centers, and cities are healthy, they will hold their own.

Conversely, if our rural areas with their resource-based enterprises are healthy, they will be more resistant to the germs that are trying to invade them.

The third principle is recognizing that developers don't cause sprawl.

They simply seek the path of least resistance in building and selling their products.

If resistance in the path that leads to the more traditional patterns of the compact town is lessened, and a market for traditional patterns can be shown to exist, they will be allies in the implementation of more responsible patterns of development.

To inform Maine's discussion about sprawl, the State Planning Office has undertaken market research of more than 600 homebuyers to better understand who the sprawlers are and why we are moving away from our city and town centers.

This research is the basis for our effort to use the most important tool of all to fight sprawl – the market place.

Sprawl, after all, is a product of the market place, in which thousands of people make everyday decisions they think are in their best interests.

We know now that sprawl actually fails to meet many of those individuals' needs and so are embarking on an education and marketing campaign:

- to demonstrate to homebuilders that there is a strong market for an alternative to sprawl,
- to persuade towns to reform their ordinances to allow these neighborhoods to be built, and
- to release pent-up demand for what we are calling the Great American Neighborhood.

We now know that not everyone wants a home in the country or in a suburban development, yet if you want a new home somewhere else, your choice is limited in the market place.

Local land use ordinances ban traditional neighborhoods and villages.

Homebuilders have been building little beside suburban homes for so long, they are skeptical there is any other market.

Consumers, confronted with older in-town neighborhoods afflicted with noise, traffic, and deterioration assume there is no alternative, but to move outward.

That is what most do.

(Figure 1) According to our survey, 75% either moved outward to or stayed in rural or suburban places.

Only 12% moved to or stayed in in-town settings.

(Figure 3) Most recent homebuyers feel pushed outward to rural and suburban areas to escape crowded, noisy, and traffic congested settings.

Fortunately, these issues are not the hard core social issues that are most often cited for outward movement in national surveys – that of crime, pollution, and unsafe schools – but of a physical nature that can be overcome by good design.

The homebuyers we surveyed were also pulled by:

- a desire to be closer to nature and wildlife,
- a prospect of greater privacy, and
- the characteristics of their new neighborhood.

(Figure 6) When rural homebuyers were questioned about the impacts of their choices, they uniformly perceived themselves as having no impact on or helping:

- the environment – 58% think they are preserving lands used by wildlife and 54% think they are preserving open space around towns and cities;
- reduce property taxes;
- preserve a sense of community – 57% think they are helping preserve a sense of community.

Only:

- 9% think they are worsening air pollution and congestion from cars,
- 4% think they are hurting farms and woodlands,
- 7% think they are worsening wildlife habitat,
- 3% think they are having a negative impact on open space around towns and cities, and
- 9% think they are worsening property taxes.

(Figure 7) Furthermore, when asked if they would change their decision if they knew it would worsen or hurt various aspects on their social or natural environment, many would not change their decisions.

The most significant aspects that affected their decisions were wildlife (50%) followed by open space and farms and woodlands (each just over 40%).

For many homebuyers, that decision to move outward meets their lifestyles and preferences. But for a large share of the outward moving market, it's not what they're looking for.

We know this because of a cluster analysis of our survey results.

(Figure 8) The analysis grouped homebuyers into five categories based on their need:

- to be close to neighbors and privacy,
- to be close to nature and convenient to stores and services, and
- to be near or far away from families with children.

We gave each group a descriptive label to help us remember it.

The five groups are:

- Ozzies and Harriets,
- Small Town Civics,
- Young Turks,
- Suburban Thoreaus, and
- Introspectives.

(Figure 9) Ozzies and Harriets, which are 24% of the market, want neighborhood but proximity to stores and services is unimportant.

They are most likely to have children at home and want to be near families with children.

They are also more likely to choose a new home on a roomy lot in a suburban residential development.

(Figure 12) Like the Ozzies and Harriets, Small Town Civics, also 24% of the market, want neighborhood, but they also want to be close to shops and services.

Many choose lots of ½ acre or less.

(Figure 15) Young Turks, about 12 % of the market, are the youngest and most male of all the clusters.

Many are in professional and administrative occupations.

Environmental and neighborhood surroundings are comparatively unimportant to them as long as they can preserve their privacy.

One might say that as long as they have their cell phones and lap tops, they are happy anywhere.

They are the most likely to move to or stay in an urban setting.

(Figure 18) Suburban Thoreaus, 23% of the market, must have nature out their back door. It is a necessity.

They don't care about proximity to services and prefer little interaction with their neighbors.

(Figure 21) Introspective, 15% of the market, may have the hardest time finding a suitable setting.

They want proximity to services as much as Small Town Civics, but value their privacy and do not want a lot of interaction with their neighbors.

(Figure 25) Choice varies widely across the clusters.

Suburban Thoreaus and Ozzies and Harriets are more likely than other groups to purchase lots with two or more acres.

Suburban Thoreaus are much more likely than other groups to be on a lot of three or more acres.

Small Town Civics, Young Turks, and Introspectives are more likely to purchase smaller lots of 1/4 acre or smaller.

(Figure 27) When given the choice of preferring hunting and fishing out their back door versus being close to stores, theaters, and gyms:

- Suburban Thoreaus and Ozzies and Harriets prefer hunting and fishing and
- Small Town Civics, Young Turks, and Introspectives prefer closeness to stores, theaters, and gyms.

(Figure 28) When asked if they feel safe because neighbors are close by or because they are away from crime in rural settings:

- Small Town Civics feel safer because neighbors are close by, while
- Suburban Thoreaus almost as strongly prefer the reverse – that they are far away from crime in rural settings.

(Figure 34) When we asked whether a homebuyer would consider living closer to town if he or she had known their decision would hurt wildlife habitat, open space, farms, woodlands, taxes, air quality, and downtowns:

- Small Town Civics are more sensitive than others to the impacts of their locational decisions on their environment;
- Ozzies and Harriets express concern about loss of wildlife habitat, farms, and woodlands, and might consider living closer to the center of town if they knew they were contributing to the problem; and
- Suburban Thoreaus believe they are helping wildlife and open space by their location choices, but would not change their decision even though they may be harming them.

(Figure 35) The bottom line is that about 37% of the homebuying market, not including those already in urban settings, are ripe targets for an education and marketing campaign to reverse sprawl and promote livable communities.

The most fruitful markets to target in a marketing campaign are those Small Town Civics, Young Turks, and Introspectives who, despite their values and preferences, move outward to suburban or rural settings (or move part way inward from the country to suburbia).

Small Town Civics who are moving from place to place in rural or suburban settings may also be amenable targets.

The messages to these market segments should be positive ones, emphasizing convenience, proximity to services, and, in a well-designed setting, the availability of community and interactions when that is what is wanted, and the assurance of privacy and quiet when that is what is wanted.

A second market segment at which to aim a campaign are those Ozzies and Harriets who also are moving outward to suburb or countryside and might be intercepted with the appropriate educational message about the potential harm of such decisions on wildlife habitat, open space, woodlands, and farms.

While presently unaware of such impacts, this market cluster apparently is sensitive to these features of the landscape.

Ozzies and Harriets want neighborhood and if presented with an opportunity to experience a place with strong neighborhood values in a traditional setting, might opt for it rather than a more contemporary suburban development.

One market segment that appears set in its ways and not a worthwhile target for a campaign is the Suburban Thoreaus.

They need to be close to nature and will tend to move in that direction even if they come to realize that they, either individually or cumulatively with others like them, are harming the very nature they seek.

To capture the most promising targets, an alternative that requires thoughtful design to recapture the best elements of a traditional or Great American Neighborhood, must be available.

The designs must build in both a desirable public realm and essential private space and manage traffic and noise.

A Great American Neighborhood has 5 or 6 key elements:

- walkability from one end to the other,

- a civic core and mix of neighborhood uses,
- a street network that's interconnected but where through-traffic does not afflict local streets,
- sensitivity to human scale, and
- I believe to be successful in northern New England, a connection to nature.

The Great American Neighborhood includes public space that provides opportunities for chance meetings and planned events as well as intentional private space for families, gardens, and quiet reflection.

(Figure 36) A walkable neighborhood is defined by the distance a person can walk in about 10 minutes -- people are less likely to think of areas further away as part of their neighborhood.

People tend to walk about 250-350 feet/minute, so in 5 minutes they can walk about 1,500 feet and in 10 minutes, about 3,000 feet.

This translates into an area of about 100-250 acres.

But a neighborhood's walkability only tends to be worthwhile if there is something to walk by or to.

This suggests the value of a neighborhood including a variety of land uses, including open space.

The standards I will talk about next will vary for different settings – small town, large town, small city, large city..

(Figure 37) These standards reflect Great American Neighborhoods in a small town.

Approximately 1/3-1/2 of the neighborhood would be in open space of some kind, whether private, unavailable, or otherwise – including ball fields associated with a school or park and commonly-held or public land.

Overall gross densities will vary, but in the example shown here would be approximately 1 unit/acre and an average net residential density of 1.5-2.5 units/acre.

The typical lot size is 1-4 units/acre or approximately 15,000-20,000 square foot lots.

This amounts to about 100-250 dwellings units or 250-750 people which is enough population to support a small Mom & Pop store or a video shop.

If commercial land use is adjacent to another neighborhood, a bigger commercial core could be supported.

(Figure 38) I mentioned that the Great American Neighborhood has a Civic Core. This could be a church or a school or some other use.

The Civic Core tends to be a meeting place and often provides the neighborhood with its most memorable or recognizable characteristic..

(Figure 39) Traffic is a tricky element.

Some research suggests that if a pedestrian has to wait on average more than 2 seconds to cross any neighborhood street during peak hours, he or she is less likely to be intimately knowledgeable about the area on the other side of the street.

This type of wait translates into about 2,000-3,000 vehicles/day and tends to separate sides of a neighborhood, but if commercial uses are located there, they can serve as a meeting place within and between neighborhoods.

What we've seen happen to our neighborhoods in centers is that local streets that were once connectors have become commuter sluice ways making our urban neighborhoods a bit frayed around the edges, cutting up or fragmenting neighborhoods making them noisy, unpleasant, and unsafe.

These issues are primary pushes for all clusters.

(Figure 40) Human scale refers, among other things, to the feeling a person has walking along a street.

(Figure 41) When people are in a place with a good human scale, they linger and enjoy themselves.

(Figure 42) Let's take a walk on this street, which is Pearl Street in Camden, Maine, a Great American "Small Town" Neighborhood.

The street is about 24 feet wide.

But this is not all there is to the right-of-way.

Next to it is the esplanade and, importantly, in it are street trees, which our survey, and the literature suggest is a very important feature.

Beyond the esplanade is the sidewalk.

The combined sidewalk, esplanade with the trees, and the street itself form the public right-of-way.

In a Great American Neighborhood, the right-of-way is very important.

(Figure 43) This is the place in the neighborhood where kids learn how to play catch, neighbors meet, cars travel and park, and kids roller blade. It is a multipurpose space and a humanizing element.

There is a dimensional aspect of this cross-section that many observers have noted – that is the relationship between the distance between houses and the height of the structures.

In a New England village, we have found that in neighborhoods that best hold their value, that are the most sought-after, most liked, rarely does the ratio exceed 4:1 or 3.5:1.

In more urban areas, measures of 1:1 even work.

However, in low density residential subdivision settings, these ratios are lost.

In suburban mall settings, they go out the window. They are not a human setting.

(Figure 44) Finally, there's an important element that we call the public-private continuum, made up of :

- public space (the sidewalk, esplanade with trees, and the street itself),
- point between the sidewalk and the building that is called the front yard (this is a semipublic space, still part of the public realm where neighbors stop to chat when the resident is gardening),
- then the area abutting the front yard, the porch (that is semiprivate where the resident can look out on the public space without joining in, can watch their kids play, have a private conversation with a friend; it is an important place where residents can decide whether to interact;
- then the private space is the house and the back yard.

Unfortunately, our public realm is so awful these days, no one, except New Urbanists, thinks about building a front porch – instead they build a back deck.

(Figure 45) In this slide, you can see these spaces – public, semiprivate, and private.

Everyone needs privacy, just like everyone needs some interaction.

People get their privacy in their back yard. This can be facilitated with simple, but common sense arrangements like:

- setting the garage back from the house and
- judicious use of fencing and plantings.

This a small private space of about 400 square feet.

Today, when we build subdivisions instead of neighborhoods with houses in the middle of lots, garages oriented to front yards instead of buffering back yards, back yards are no longer private.

It's no surprise that when faced with this alternative of a place with no privacy and no public realm, people are choosing 2-3 acre rural lots and satisfy their need for the public realm at church or temple or school activities – all on a scheduled basis instead of outdoors on a spontaneous basis.

(Figure 46) The Great American Neighborhood provides for this public-private continuum.

(Figure 47) In summary, no single set of regulations or financial incentives or other tools will, by themselves, reverse sprawl and restore livable communities.

We must reach the hearts and souls of everyday people making everyday decisions using sophisticated knowledge of the market place.